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The Whitetail Deer

Pennsylvania's State Animal

By NED SMITH

1. **In Pennsylvania what animal is the deer's worst enemy?**
2. **How long does it take for a whitetail buck to grow a large set of antlers?**
3. **What is the color of a deer's summer coat?**
4. **Do all year-and-a-half old bucks produce spikes?**
5. **The bulk of a deer's diet consists of grasses. True or false?**
6. **What is meant by the "rutting season?"**
7. **Of what use is the whitetail's long tail?**
8. **Fights between rival bucks often result in death for one or both of the combatants. True or false?**

WHITETAIL—the most thrilling word in the outdoorsman's vocabulary! Brainy and handsome, a challenge to the hunter in us, our native deer is easily the most popular big game animal in the U.S.A. in general and Pennsylvania in particular. In fact, its popularity became a matter of legislative record when on October 2, 1959 Governor Lawrence signed into law a bill adopting the whitetail deer as the Commonwealth's official State animal.

Aside from the rare elk, the whitetail is the only member of the deer tribe found in Pennsylvania. There's little resemblance between the two, although some fools seem determined to wipe out our meager elk population by shooting the protected animals during the open deer season. An elk is a huge animal. Mature cows weigh 350-400 pounds; bulls seldom weigh less than 400 pounds, and have reached 800 pounds. It takes an exceptional whitetail to exceed 200 pounds on the hoof. The elk's head and neck are dark brown, the latter adorned with a shaggy mane in contrast to the sleek neck of the deer. Seen from the rear, the elk wears a big, light colored rump patch and an insignificant stub of a tail. The whitetail's rump is brown, but the area directly beneath the tail is pure white. The tail itself is large and hairy, brown above and white on the underside. The antlers are as dissimilar as the other physical features. The elk's backward sweeping rack frequently reaches a length of sixty inches, more than twice the length of a trophy whitetail's forward curving antlers, measured on the curve.

Wherever deer are discussed three arguments sooner or later crop up. One concerns the speed of a running deer, another the height of a deer as it stands in life, while the other—frequently instigated by a magazine cover or calendar painting—concerns the color of the critters.

Speed is deceptive. The man behind the gun will swear the ten-pointer he missed was hitting eighty. The truth of the matter is that a deer's speed seldom exceeds thirty-five or forty miles per hour. His usual high-bounding exit is probably nearer twenty or twenty-five m.p.h. It is in jumping that the whitetail excells. He can soar over windfalls and boulders as though on invisible wings.

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Clearing an eight foot fence or broad jumping twenty feet is no more difficult for him than stepping over a crack in the sidewalk would be for a schoolboy.

As to height, only a *big* buck will stand three feet high at the shoulder. The average Pennsylvania doe is probably nearer thirty inches tall.

Color is variable. A whitetail can be almost any shade of brown or gray. What starts most arguments is the fact that there are two distinct seasonal pelages. In the spring the adult deer acquires a coat of rather fine reddish-brown hair. The face is often marked with an obscure blackish "Y". In autumn this pelage is replaced by a salt-and-pepper coat of gray or grayish brown color. The hairs are coarse and hollow, providing such excellent insulation that the animal can lie in the snow for hours on a cold day and cause no noticeable melting.

DEER BED IN THE SNOW

Fawns, of course, wear the well-known rusty coat with white spots until early fall, when it is replaced with the adult gray winter coat.

One thing most deer hunters fervently wish for is a buck with trophy class antlers. While the whitetail's rack can not compare in size with those of its larger cousin, the mule deer, a symmetrical set of antlers with an eighteen or twenty inch spread is a supremely handsome prize. When we look at a trophy rack it's hard to believe that those massive, bony antlers were formed within the span of about five months. It's true though. In mid-spring the new growths begin as mere knobs of blood-filled living tissue covered with a fuzzy coating called *velvet*. By mid-summer they have acquired their points, if they are to have any, and by early August have attained full size. Within another month they have hardened and the velvet covering has been shed. We can read many things in a set of antlers. Bent, twisted tines or beams are the result of an accident while the antlers were soft and growing. Burrow-like holes tell us a botfly larvae, similar to the "warbles" we find on rabbits, once lived in the soft tissue. Broken antlers speak of fierce clashes with rival bucks. Spike horns mean a dietary deficiency; large racks generally mean good food. Great racks aren't necessarily proof of advanced age. With the best of food a year-and-a-half old buck can produce

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a beautiful rack. As a matter of fact the nicest trophies are carried by animals from three to six years old. Beyond that age the average buck produces poorer and poorer racks each succeeding year.

Rubbing the antlers on trees to remove the last traces of velvet is only a prelude to the vigorous treatment they will soon receive as the rutting, or mating, season approaches. At this time the bucks become extremely belligerent, and trees and bushes are horned with the same ferocity as would be a challenging male.

Should a rutting buck meet up with a rival buck at this time something's gotta give. Coughing and wheezing a few insults they sidle up to one another, hair standing on end and looking as mean as old Satan himself. They circle slowly, watching tensely for an opening or a false move, then in a flash they wheel and slam their antlered heads together with a resouding crash. From there on the fight becomes a pushing match, sometimes interspersed with more breaks and antler-busting charges. The fight is over when one buck feels himself weakening and beats an ignominious retreat. Seldom is he pursued and rarely does the fight end in injury. Occasionally, however, one of the gladiators is gored or antlers are so inextricably locked that the combatants die of exhaustion or starvation.

Whitetails are anything but monogamous. Any and all does are candidates for a buck's amorous advances, and the latter is not adverse to rushing pell-mell over hill and dale looking for more fields to conquer. Fortunately this lovesickness has largely abated by the opening of the December deer season, permitting the cervine Romeos to concentrate on the more mundane matter of keeping their hides intact.

Some time in the winter the bucks shed their now useless antlers. What was a haughty twelve-pointer in the morning might be, without warning, as hornless as a doe by noon. Strangely enough, those selfsame growths that could not previously be detached from their bony pedestals by the strongest man might unceremoniously drop from the deer's head of their own weight when the time is ripe.

Winter is the critical season for whitetails. Wherever the deer population exceeds the carrying capacity of the range, malnutrition rears its ugly head. Fawns of the past spring generally fall victim first, for the simple reason that the little browse available to the larger deer is beyond their reach. Malnutrition paves the way for pneumonia, too, and makes deer easy prey for harassing dogs.

Springtime brings with it new hope and new life for the deer herd. In late May or June the fawns are born —one or two to each pregnant doe. Weighing an average of four or five pounds at birth a tiny fawn—with its spotted coat, long pencil-thin legs,

and innocent baby face—is an appealing creature. Too appealing, I might add, to well-meaning but uninformed persons who carry them from the woods, thinking they are lost. The truth is, their mothers are nearly always in the neighborhood but, of course, will seldom put in an appearance in the presence of humans. In most cases the "rescued" fawn is only a few days old—too wobbly to escape and too trusting to try. A week later, though, it could make a fool of the fleetest of humans.

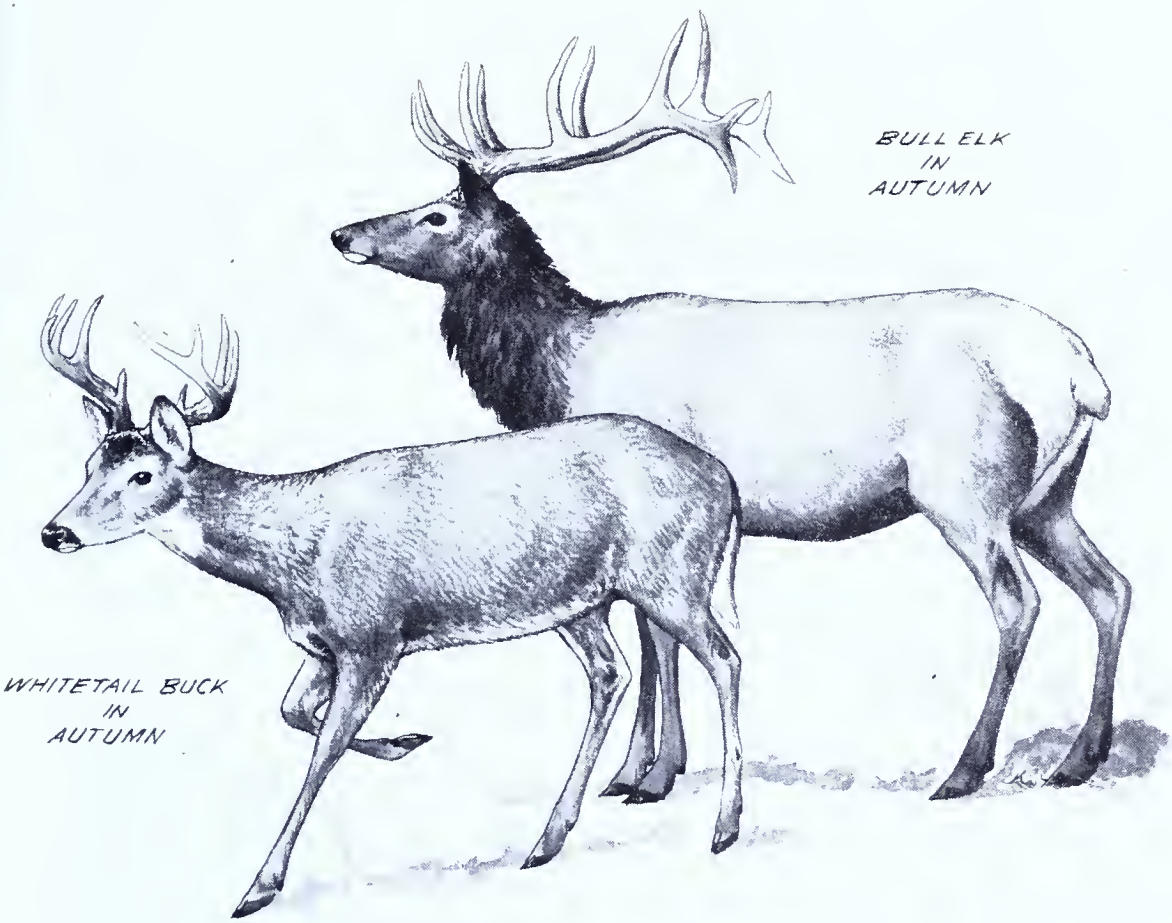
A fawn's chief defense is in hiding. Concealed in a grassy place or on the forest floor where its spotted coat makes it nearly invisible it will flatten its gangly form against the ground at the first hint of danger. The older fawns seem to know when they've been discovered and will take off in high gear when "the jig's up." Captured, they bleat loudly and repeatedly and in their anxiety the does often rush quite near. Ordinarily, though, Mamma will remain just out of sight, sometimes stamping and snorting, but making no attempt to defend her offspring. Instances in which does have fought off dogs or foxes are rare and exceptional examples.

As the fawns grow older they accompany their mothers more and more, becoming familiar with their home range, nibbling their first solid food, learning what will harm them and what will not. At times they romp and kick like frolicsome calves, but like other wild children they are disciplined, too, when the occasion calls for it. A sound whack from their mother's forefoot is the deer's equivalent of the woodshed treatment.

By the end of September they have exchanged their spotted coats for the gray-brown pelage of adulthood. The buck fawns now sport one or two inch antlers, or "buttons." Although the males will not become sexually mature until the next autumn, many of the female fawns will be bred during their first autumn and bear fawns of their own at the age of one year.

Of all the facets of the whitetail's life, its food habits are probably the most misunderstood. We see a herd of deer grazing in a field and immediately classify them as grazing animals. Actually they are primarily browsing animals, but have learned to seek food in agricultural areas because of a shortage of natural and preferred foods in the forests. It is true that during the spring and summer whitetails graze to some extent on various weeds and grasses in forest clearings and edges, and during the autumn season they avidly consume large quantities of acorns and other mast, but during most of the year they try to subsist on the tender tips of trees and shrubs when available. High on the preferred list are the various maples, the sumacs, hemlocks, white cedar, sassafras, witch hazel, and others. Chestnut oak, wild cherry, aspen, chestnut, sweet fern, and dozens of other plants are heavily utilized, although it's sometimes difficult to say which are preferred and which are eaten for want of something better. Such plants as mountain laurel and rhododendron are starvation foods.

The whitetail's daily routine varies somewhat with the season and the



"BUTTON BUCK"
IN
WINTER

DOE AND FAWN
IN
SUMMER

NED SMITH

location, but as a rule most of the feeding is done at night. Around daybreak there is a general movement from the feeding grounds to the bedding areas. Once there, the animals usually lie about, chewing their cuds and taking life easy most of the day. A little feeding and perhaps drinking is indulged in around noon, and in remote areas where the deer are rarely disturbed this mid-day activity is quite extended. Shortly after sunset the animals again stir themselves, and begin their evening feeding spree. Under the cover of darkness they become bolder, and it is then that they are more likely to raid a buckwheat field or apple orchard.

Hunters are familiar with the whitetail's sound of alarm—that shrill nasal snort or whistle. Other means of communication are not so well known. The bleat of a frightened fawn and the threats and challenges of rutting bucks have already been mentioned. I've heard does "talking" to their fawns in little moaning sounds that were scarcely audible twenty feet away. Word of danger is also conveyed by stamping the forefeet against the ground. Scent, too, is used in communication. Watch the tarsal glands on the inside of a deer's hocks. When the animal's suspicions are aroused, the hairs over the glands stand on end. Each step rubs these tufts together, spraying the air with the strong-smelling secretion like two brushes stroked one against another. Downwind the scent is soon picked up by every other deer. (This secretion is the reason these glands should not be handled while skinning the deer. It s strong taste is easily transferred to the meat). The tail itself is a danger signal, waving like a huge white flag that can be seen at an astounding distance.

It's difficult to imagine that anything but man and his high-powered rifle could kill an animal so intelligent, alert, and fleet of foot as a whitetail deer, but the creatures have other enemies to reckon with. One of the most insidious is starvation. Of late years two others have been steadily gaining prominence. One is the automobile and the other the free-running dog. Slower, more attentive driving in deer country would undoubtedly lessen the highway slaughter. The dog problem is a tougher nut to crack. The average person has no conception of the number of deer that are killed by packs of dogs running wild in our Pennsylvania mountains. These renegades not only kill deer to fill their bellies, they also pull down deer for the fun of it. Game Protectors can tell you of their victims they've found —pitiful creatures with the look of terror in their eyes, wanting to run but unable to move because the canine fiends had hamstrung them and torn away half their hindquarters.

Fortunately the whitetail is endowed with the necessary vigor, craft, and reproductive capacity to thrive in spite of hunting pressure, dogs, cars, jacklighters, and disease. With a little help from man in the form of sound management and an understanding public there's no reason why Pennsylvania shouldn't always be a major hangout for the smartest, prettiest, and best deer of them all.

ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS

1. **The stray dog.**
2. **About five months, regardless of size.**
3. **Reddish brown.**
4. **No. Under excellent food conditions such bucks will often produce racks with eight or more points.**
5. **False. Deer much prefer the tender tips of twigs, acorns, etc.**
6. **The mating season.**
7. **It is used as a danger signal.**
8. **False. Most fights result in nothing more serious than loss of face.**

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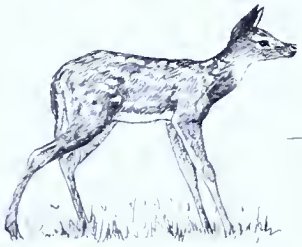
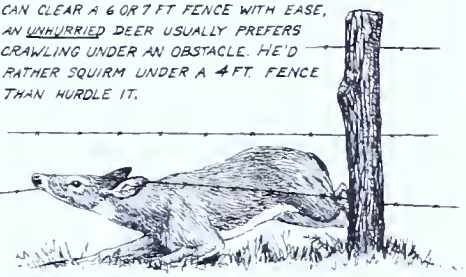
White-tail Facts

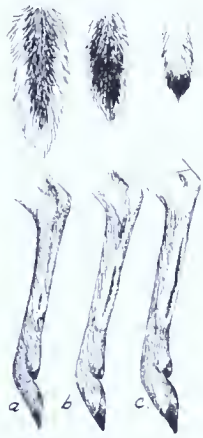
BY E. STANLEY SMITH

THE BELIEF THAT FAWNS GIVE OFF NO SCENT IS ERRONEOUS — DOGS, FOXES, ETC. HAVE NO DIFFICULTY SNIFFING OUT THEIR LOCATIONS.



THOUGH HE'S OUR MOST FAMOUS HIGH-JUMPER AND CAN CLEAR A 6 OR 7 FT FENCE WITH EASE, AN UNHURRIED DEER USUALLY PREFERS CRAWLING UNDER AN OBSTACLE. HE'D RATHER SQUIRM UNDER A 4 FT. FENCE THAN HURDLE IT.





OUR WHITE-TAIL CAN BE DISTINGUISHED BY THE TAIL AND THE SMALL METATARSAL GLAND (a). THESE FEATURES ON BLACK-TAILS ARE SHOWN IN FIG b, AND FIG C SHOWS THE MULE DEER.

A DEER OF EITHER SEX LEAVES AN IMPRINT LIKE THIS ONE ON FAIRLY HARD GROUND OR LIGHT SNOW.

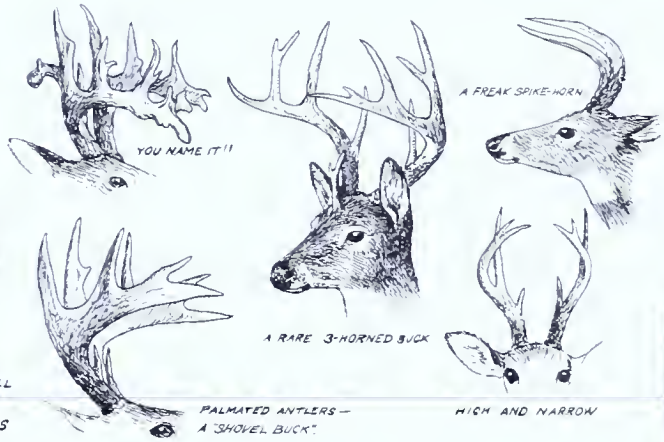
IN SOFT SOIL OR SEVERAL INCHES OF SNOW THE PRINT ON THE LEFT COULD HAVE BEEN MADE BY A BUCK OR A DOE.

WHEN POURING ON THE STEAM, AS THIS DEER WAS DOING, BOTH BUCK & DOES LEAVE IMPRINTS OF THEIR DEW-CLAWS....

YOU'RE JUST KIDDING YOURSELF IF YOU THINK ALL TRACKS SHOWING DEW-CLAW MARKS WERE MADE BY BUCKS.. ALL DEER HAVE DEW-CLAWS, AND ALL LEAVE THEIR IMPRINT UNDER THE PROPER CONDITIONS.

DON'T BE MISLEAD BY THE POPULAR THEORY THAT A WOUNDED DEER ALWAYS SLAPS DOWN HIS TAIL, WHILE AN UNHURT ANIMAL INVARIABLY RAISES IT WHEN RUNNING AWAY. EXCEPTIONS ARE SUFFICIENTLY COMMON TO WARRANT A COMPLETE INVESTIGATION AFTER SHOOTING AT A DEER, REGARDLESS OF THE POSITION OF HIS FLAG..

DURING THE MATING SEASON AMOROUS BUCKS LOSE ALL THEIR CUSTOMARY WARINESS AND FOLLOW THE TRAIL OF DESIRABLE DOES SO INTENTLY THAT OLD-TIME HUNTERS OFTEN KILLED 4 OR 5 BUCKS SEVERAL MINUTES APART BY WAITING ON THE TRACK OF A DOE.



WHITE-TAIL ANTLERS COME IN A VARIETY OF SHAPES & SIZES. ABOVE ARE A FEW.

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